

## **Not just clowning around Entrepreneur speaks to kids about dealing with adversity**

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Wayne County Mail  
Thursday, October 31, 2002



Last Friday at Ontario Elementary School, a clown tried and failed to cross a tightrope set up between two short chairs. After he and the chairs fell, he got up, brushed himself off and triumphantly crossed the tightrope while it lay on the ground.

For the clown's real-life alter-ego Fred Sarkis, it was really that simple.

Yet it still is so immeasurably complex.

The successful Rochester entrepreneur who rose from the son of a poor Depression-era family to multimillionaire presented his life's story to Wayne Central and Gananda elementary schools last week as part of Red Ribbon Week.

During his presentation, called "Prisoner of the Truck," he told children about how his father would lock him inside the truck the family used to run a produce business during the day then went into a bar to gamble at night.

"All of the other kids were out playing in the summer, and I was locked in a truck," he told his audience. "The only thing that helped me was I thought that God was in the truck."

Sarkis said that he truly didn't understand his father's gambling addiction until many years later, but said that his father did teach him some simple lessons that helped Sarkis work his way out of poverty and become a successful entrepreneur.

It all came down to strawberries. One day during a summer, he was selling strawberries from the back of the truck with his younger brother.

Sarkis said that after his father realized Sarkis' little brother was outselling him, he showed his timid and self-doubting older son how to sell strawberries -- by keeping his head up, exuding confidence and making an offer that the customer couldn't refuse.

"You got to do things with enthusiasm," Sarkis said.

The second lesson was having the courage to be honest.

At age 12, after an argument, his father asked him if he wanted to continue selling produce for the rest of his life.

Still angry from the confrontation, Sarkis said he plucked up his courage, and instead of deferring

with his usual "Yes, Pa" answer, he told his father that he "would rather die" than work forever.

Instead of getting angry with him, his father told him that he had to use his time on the truck to study and bring his grades up in school.

Sarkis, who had been an unpopular kid at school with poor grades, suddenly stopped feeling sorry for himself and saw his way out of his prison.

"I kind of looked in the mirror and said 'Fred, from this point on, you are responsible for the rest of your life.'"

His grades picked up, he received a scholarship to business school and was able to make more money in an office than on his father's produce truck, freeing him.

Later, he went on to serve in World War II and built up a multimillion dollar business empire, which included Bristol Ski Resort.

After he retired to Florida in his 60s, Sarkis kept active and found a new love in tennis. He trained diligently and set a goal of becoming the top-ranked national player in his age group.

One day, his tennis instructor, a teacher at a local middle school asked him to come in and share the story of his life with children at the school."

"After that day, I began to realize there might be more to life than hitting a ball over a net," he said.

In 1999, after sharing the initial draft of his autobiography with his younger brother, Joe, Joe asked Sarkis why he didn't demand to go into the bar with their father, telling his older brother that he simply followed their father in one night since he wanted a hot meal.

Sarkis, who didn't realize that his father had a gambling addiction asked Joe why it took their father so long to sell fruits and vegetables in the bar -- after which Joe told Sarkis exactly what his father did.

That's when Sarkis truly understood his father's problem, and all the anger and confusion of dealing with his father's problem confronted him for the first time.

After seeing a therapist, he said he looked for a sign telling him what to do.

It arrived in the mail on Aug. 21, 1999 in the form of 128 letters from pupils and teachers at the Florida middle school thanking him for his talk. The letters encouraged him to reach schools with his message.

And as he's talked to children over the last several years, Sarkis said that he's making his peace with his father -- who he said suffered from an addiction yet loved his family very much.

"Every time I get a hug from a kid, it's like my father giving me a hug that he wasn't able to give me while I was growing up," he said after he finished his talk at OP.